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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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We’re in for another scorcher this coming week, and we started off today with some hot weather. Mix in some thunderstorms, and we have a typical week here in New England! Hopefully the weather won’t be too "bad" that I might lose some motivation to get some work done this weekend!

I could continue my small discussion of the oil problems going on in the Gulf, still, but I’m not going to do that. I’m sure that Joe will have something to say about it, so I’ll let him have at it. As far as I’m concerned, how much more can be said that hasn’t already? There are a number of questions being asked that I agree should be asked, and there are no answers forthcoming. Well, there are answers, but they’re all quite ambiguous.

I had another cardiac test this week, and go back to see my cardiologist next week to see where everything stands. The test that I had is a "stress test". Fairly simple. I was hooked up to a heart monitor/EKG machine, and then stepped onto a treadmill. Every three minutes, the treadmill would go a little faster, and the incline raised. I got to the fourth level before I had to call it quits - too fast for me to keep up, and my legs were killing me. One thing I learned (or reaffirmed) - I’m in terrible condition! Hopefully, this test will turn out to be okay like the tests I had earlier!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Yes, another week has come and gone, and we’re looking at... well, even calling it "a dribble" of NewsGroup activity would be too generous.

So, you guessed it, I’m going to talk about other stuff.

Of course, the Gulf "oil spill" is top-of-the-list. To no one's surprise (except maybe the execs at BP), 'they' have upped the estimate of oil billowing from that now-famous pipe a mile down on the floor of the Gulf to 1.5 to 2.5 million barrels a day. Even if we split the difference and call it 2 million barrels, that's a mind-boggling amount of material. I don't care who you are, I doubt you can wrap your mind around 84 million gallons of oil every day. That's somewhere around 130 Olympic-sized swimming pools full of sludgy, nasty, smelly crude oil. That's 164 feet by 82 feet by 6 feet 7 inches times at least 130... That's about 11.5 MILLION cubic feet. Picture a cube about .64 miles (3,390 feet) on each side.. a cube of nothing but crude oil. Every day.

And that's not to mention the gas that's belching out along with it. I'm not positive of exactly what type of gas it is, but we can be pretty sure that there's a lot of methane. There usually is lots of methane along with crude oil. Sometimes it gets collected and processed for use, but a lot of the time, it just gets burned off. What's happening here.. or, what was happening up until this 'cap' was fitted in place... was that this gas was just being blown into the ocean along with the oil. I haven't heard anything yet about what this stuff might do in the ocean, and I would be surprised if anyone really knows. We've known for years now that there are huge 'reserves' of methane locked in the ocean floors all over the globe. And, at those pressures, it's kind of 'safely' locked away. But this is something different. In THIS instance, we're talking about pushing it out rather energetically along with the crude, basically 'blowing' it into the water. Will it quickly 'bubble' to the surface and add to the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere? Will it 'slowly' bubble up and displace the oxygen in the water as it does, killing anything in the 'cloud' that needs oxygen to live? We don't know. We were told that these 'booms' would keep the oil from coming ashore in Louisiana and its outer islands and marshes. And what happened? First, we couldn't get the booms out there fast enough. Then we couldn't get them set exactly right... they kept shifting so the they let the oil slip by. Then we heard that the oil was not just on the surface like we'd expected it to be, but up to at least 200 feet below the surface. How do you 'boom' that?

I had read an article a while back about the stuff that that these booms are made of. It seems that a lot of them are made of human hair. Barber shops and hair salons have been donating 'waste' hair for use in these booms, and that's a good thing. But at the same time, it's not always clear that it's not exactly like a sponge. A pound of hair can absorb about a quart of oil. That sounds like a lot until you realize exactly how light hair is. Imagine how much hair it would take to make a pound. That's a lot of hair.

But back to the methane issue. Aside from adding to the greenhouse gas problem, how will it affect the ocean? Will it leave a huge dead zone? Will it cause disease and birth defects in the critters that live in the Gulf? We just don't know... yet.

With another six weeks to go before BP finishes the 'relief' wells they're working on, We're looking at a huge amount of oil and gas added to the water in the Gulf before we get it under control.. IF we can get it under control. That is by no means certain. While BP has said "this is the way to do it", It's never been done this deep in the ocean... just like everything else we've tried.

I want to talk about some of these executives at BP for a bit too. What is it with these guys? Can't they say anything without sticking their feet in their mouths? I know that, measured against the number of press

conferences that they've given, the number of gaffs isn't terribly high, but still, you'd think that people getting paid the kind of money they are would be better at it than saying things like, "I wish it was over so I could start living my life again" or wanting to help "the small people". Granted, the latter was a case of bad language skills, but you'd think that a company like BP would be able to put a spokesperson in place to do the talking and keep well-meaning but incapable executives away from controversy.

I'm not cutting BP any slack, mostly because it's looking like they DID cut corners to get this well drilled as quickly and as cheaply as possible. And they have to make up for that. It's going to cost untold billions of dollars to fix this problem, and while most people are thinking 'months-to-years' to get back to normal, I'm thinking its going to be at least a decade... IF it can be returned to its original condition at all... in our lifetimes, of course.

Now we get to one of my favorite peeves: legislators who just have to "make the news".

[Said in best Rod Serling voice]
Case in point: One Congressman Joe Barton of Texas. The good congressman decided to buck public opinion and common sense and 'apologize' to BP CEO Tony Hayward for what he called a 'Twenty Billion Dollar Shakedown' by the Executive branch. Mr. Baron is caught in that nebulous area between pristine, clear ocean water and the oily, suffocating, ever-growing bubble of life-killing hydrocarbon-tainted bubble known as... Petroleum Zone [Cue dramatic music complete with bongos... DA dada dah]

I'm not going to jump on the good congressman. There will be plenty of people waiting in line to do that. Heck, his own party wasted no time in slapping him around, and that's as it should be. I was glad at least to see the Minority Leader not try to justify or re-engineer what Barton had said. That job was done by Barton himself, who said, "If anything I said this morning has been misconstrued, in opposite effect, I want to apologize for that misconstruction..."

But let's look at what he'd said originally:
"I'm ashamed of what happened in the White House yesterday...
a tragedy of the first proportion, that a private corporation can be subjected to what I would characterize as a shakedown, a $20 billion shakedown."

And then later he issued another statement:
"I apologize for using the term 'shakedown' with regard to yesterday's actions at the White House this morning, and I retract my apology to BP. I regret the impact that my statement this morning implied that BP should not pay for the consequences of their decisions and actions in this incident."

I don't know. There didn't seem to be much gray area in that statement. Well, for better or worse, BP has 'handed over' twenty billion dollars into an escrow account to be used for cleanup, and I THINK financial aid to those people so deeply affected by this disaster. But let's be clear, this wasn't an arm-twisting situation. BP handed over the funds as a way of avoiding at least some of the law suits that will pop up in short order. This is not just a disaster, people, this is a catastrophe, and we haven't begun to see the full effects of it. I wish I had brighter, more cheerful thoughts on the subject, but there's not much light that can shine through 200 feet of petroleum fouled ocean water.

Well, that’s all I’ve got to say this week. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Kinect Coming in the Fall!
Mortal Kombat Makes Return!
Nintendo 3DS Woos at E3!
And more!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Microsoft Makes Big Push for New Game Audience

To appeal to families ready to graduate from the Nintendo Wii, Microsoft Corp. wants to build on the success of the Wii’s motion-capture wand - by getting rid of the wand entirely.

On Monday, Microsoft detailed its new Kinect game technology, coming this fall for the Xbox 360 game console. Once known as Project Natal, the Kinect system recognizers users’ gestures and voices, so you can control on-screen avatars in racing, action and sports games just by moving your body. Microsoft showed off a "Star Wars" game, coming in 2011, that will use Kinect to let players swing virtual lightsabers from their living rooms.

Kinect’s voice feature also means you can say "pause" or "play" when watching a movie on the Xbox instead of reaching for the remote. And it has a video chat function that can connect people from different sides of the country, as Microsoft demonstrated Monday at the E3 Expo in Los Angeles, a video game conference with 45,000 industry insiders.

Kinect will launch Nov. 4 in North America, Microsoft said. Prices were not disclosed, and it’s not clear whether Kinect will come with new Xboxes or only be sold separately. The technology works with existing systems, including a new version of the Xbox console that goes on sale next week. It’s smaller, sleeker and comes with built-in Wi-Fi and a 250 gigabyte hard drive. The new Xbox will cost $299, which previously got you a hard drive with half the capacity.

Until now the Xbox has been mainly known as the device to play hard-core shooter games such as "Call of Duty" and "Halo." Microsoft ranks second in console sales to Nintendo, just ahead of PlayStation maker Sony Corp.

Since the original Xbox launched in 2001, the video game system has been part of three money-losing divisions. Microsoft doesn't break out results from the Xbox, but in total, the divisions that housed the game unit reported operating losses of about $7.45 billion from fiscal 2002 through 2007. The past two years, the group that now includes Xbox, Zune media players, Windows phone software and the touch-screen Surface table computer finally was profitable, with operating earnings of $497 million in fiscal 2008 and $169 million in fiscal 2009. The most recent figure was still less than 1 percent of the company's total operating income.

Though it is working to broaden its reach, Microsoft is still trying to nurture its loyal gamer fans, who reliably buy sequels to blockbusters like "Halo" and "Gears of War." To that end, the company announced an exclusive deal Monday with Activision Blizzard Inc., the maker of the "Call of Duty" games, that will bring downloadable content known as "map packs" to the Xbox first (and then the PlayStation 3) through 2012. Such extra content is an increasingly important business for video game makers because they can extend the life of games.

Microsoft Kinect Arrives November 4th, Battle Begins

Microsoft Corp will begin selling its "Kinect" motion-sensing game system on November 4, before the crucial holiday season, hoping to lure new and casual players to the Xbox and steal a march on rivals Nintendo Co Ltd and Sony Corp.

The world's largest software vendor, which has ambitions of making its Xbox 360 not just a gaming device but a hub of home video and Web entertainment, will also begin selling a smaller, same-priced version of the console this week.

Microsoft would not say how much Kinect - which plugs into Xboxes and lets players control games with body and hand gestures - will sell for, though analysts' estimates range from $50 to $200. Executives said 15 titles, including one from Ubisoft, will be available at the time of launch.

Ahead of this week's E3 convention, Microsoft offered sneak peaks of upcoming titles, including a LucasArts game in which Jedi Knights do battle with light sabers, and a fitness program that lets players compete in sports from bowling to sprinting.

The world's leading gaming hardware makers, hoping to reignite the slumping $60 billion industry, will unveil a plethora of futuristic gadgets at the E3 convention this week.

The rush of technology comes just as the video game industry, which dwarfs the $10 billion domestic movie box office, needs it. U.S. industry sales - hardware, software and accessories - are down more than 10 percent to $4.7 billion this year through April, according to research firm NPD Group.

Microsoft also said on Monday it had struck a deal with Walt Disney Co's ESPN network to broadcast live sporting events into U.S. living rooms through the Xbox 360 games console, bypassing traditional cable providers.

Live games will be broadcast through Microsoft’s Xbox Live service, and will be offered at no additional cost.

It already offers Netflix movies and Zune music and videos through its Xbox Live online subscription service. There has been talk that it will announce a deal to add Hulu TV shows to the service at E3.

The arrival of Kinect may pressure Nintendo, which pioneered motion-sensing gaming through an all-purpose controller with its Wii system. Nintendo is expected to unveil more details on its 3D games system that requires no glasses at E3.

"This year’s E3 gives the gaming industry the first real opportunity to prove that it’s not just about making shoot-em-up games for testosterone-fueled boys," Forrester Research analyst James McQuivey said.

"This is because the secret to the gaming industry’s future is the realization that game consoles are the most powerful device in the living room," he wrote in a note.

In a surprise announcement, Microsoft also showed off a more compact, higher-capacity Xbox console that will ship to retailers on Monday and be available to consumers this week. With a 250-gigabyte hard drive, the console will carry the same price tag of $299.

Electronic Entertainment Design and Research analyst Jesse Divnich said Microsoft set a high bar ahead of announcements from Nintendo and Sony this week.

"This presentation was a great sign of how Microsoft is transforming the Xbox into being a real entertainment platform," he said. "In a sense, they are trying to reinvent the Xbox 360, have it appeal to a broader audience."

Sony is expected to unveil its "Move" platform, which will compete with Kinect and Wii.

Microsoft’s Kinect is a three-camera system that plugs into Xbox and allows for hands-free games and controlling the console with voice commands. The platform, if it works well, takes gamers a step beyond Nintendo’s Wii.

Some may have been disappointed by the lack of blockbuster franchises - such as Activision Blizzard Inc’s "Call of Duty" - in the initial wave of releases, but executives said that was a conscious decision.

"The last thing I want to do is take a franchise that’s strong and shove something in it too quickly," said Phil Spencer, vice president of Microsoft Game Studios.

"We want to put Kinect in the hands of creators (of Call of Duty and so on) and see what magic they come up with."

Janco Partners’ analyst Mike Hickey said, "The fitness and dance games are both potential killer applications, driving a reasonably strong Kinect attach rate to the existing installed base and early adopters.

"The ESPN deal is huge, and the social networking applications Kinect offers are potentially powerful for driving initial adoption and loyalty," he sadded.

Nintendo Woos Gamers with Classics, 3-D

Nintendo is showing off its 3-D handheld gaming system and introducing updates to classic game franchises like "Donkey Kong" and "Kirby."

It’s part of an effort by Nintendo to stay ahead of its rivals by sticking to what it knows best - video games. Meanwhile, Sony and Microsoft are working to expand the reach of their consoles beyond gaming.

At the E3 Expo in Los Angeles on Tuesday, an industry conference of 45,000, Nintendo introduced the 3DS, the latest version of its popular handheld device. But unlike other attempts at 3-D screens, the gadget works without special glasses.

Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter says Nintendo "blew people away." But the big question is the price. Nintendo didn’t say how much the 3DS would cost or when it will be available.

Mortal Kombat Returns for Xbox 360 and PS3

I’m watching the new Mortal Kombat E3 2010 teaser trailer and chuckling like I do every time I watch Eli Roth’s Thanksgiving. Whoever put that together - in particular those last buzz-blade-whirring seconds - knew all the right buttons to press.

There’s Shao Kahn looking ridiculous (and vaguely like the Sycorax in David Tennant’s Doctor Who). There’s Raiden discharging ribbon-like plasma filaments like someone cracking their knuckles before a fight. Johnny Cage unloads uppercuts, shadow kicks, and oozing balls of ectoplasmic something-or-other. Reptile crouches, pummels, then disappears. Kitana twirls, pirouettes, and sends an opponent aerial before battering him senseless. The hits, whacks, and thumps - fairly tame for a Mortal Kombat - keep coming for another half a minute before the trailer dishes up the bloody good fun as Johnny Cage dissolves latex, flesh, and muscle in something like Kill Bill’s five-point palm exploding heart technique. The trailer ends with Kung Lao, a razor-rimmed hat, and...well...see for yourself.

Note the hybrid perspective, a mix of 2D and 3D, sort of like Capcom’s Street Fighter IV. Midway seems to agree with recent fighter fans that there’s already plenty to juggle in the way of throws, blocks, and special moves without having to further guesstimate spatial possibilities in three fully realized dimensions. I tend to agree.

So thank Warner Bros. Interactive for the trailer, the game itself (due in 2011 for both PlayStation and Xbox 360), and its new co-op two-on-two arcade mode.

Then thank goodness Joe Lieberman and The National Coalition on Television Violence didn’t succeed when it tried to frighten the public into thinking violent games like Mortal Kombat were "training early killers," all those years ago.

High-Energy E3 Bodes Well for Videogame Lovers

Scintillating titles, hot motion-sensing controllers and rich 3-D play dazzled videogame lovers at a high-energy Electronic Entertainment Expo that heralded stellar times ahead.

The E3 show floor was packed with theater-sized screens streaming scenes from action games while people played titles in booths decked out to look like fantasy worlds.

People queued to try Nintendo’s new 3DS Microsoft Kinect that lets players command Xbox 360 games solely with gestures, and Sony Move motion-controls for PlayStation 3 consoles.

"This year’s E3 was foremost about the introduction of new technology that promises to reshape the industry going forward," said Scott Steinberg, founder of GameExec Magazine and Game Industry TV.

Microsoft unveiled Kinect in a theatrical event two days before Sony and Nintendo staged their press events at the opening of the expo on Tuesday.

Along with touting Move, Sony hyped 3-D videogames such as "Killzone 3" for the PS3.

"Sony really pushed 3-D hard but I think they are jumping the gun," said Shane Satterfield, editor-in-chief of GameTrailers.com videogame website.

"A lot of people just recently got HD televisions and I don’t think they are ready to go out and get 3-D. I think Sony is planting the seed right now."

But Satterfield admitted he was stunned by glasses-free 3-D graphics in Nintendo’s new 3DS, and said he was also impressed by tilt-sensing and 3-D camera capabilities built into the hand-held gaming devices.

"My jaw just dropped," Satterfield said of seeing the 3DS. "There were objects hovering above the system. I don’t know if Nintendo used witchcraft, but however they did it was amazing."

Microsoft and Sony both made "auspicious" showings, but Nintendo "hit it out of the park," according to Satterfield.

Kinect seemed part of a move by Microsoft to expand Xbox 360 consoles to be all-purpose entertainment devices that let people get online films and music as well as access websites and video chat with friends.

"Game consoles aren’t just about games anymore," Steinberg said. "They are portals to online services that can now be controlled with a spoken word or a wave of a hand."

Kinect lets people control Xbox 360 consoles with voice commands or natural gestures.

Nintendo started the motion-controller craze with the launch of Wii consoles in late 2006 and its two big rivals will wade into the arena later this year when their spins on the concept hit US markets.

E3 was also packed with powerhouse sequels to proven blockbusters such

as "Assassin’s Creed," "Call of Duty" "Halo," "Dead Space," "Portal," and "Zelda."

Private hands-on demonstrations of coming games were booked to capacity throughout E3.

"Rage," "Brink" and "Bulletstorm" were among promising new titles getting rave reviews.

"Rage" is "a combination shooter-racing game in a beautifully rendered post-apocalyptic wasteland where you blow the bejesus out of slavers and anything else that comes your way, sort of a Mad Max," Steinberg said.

"Bulletstorm" is a shooter game that rewards players for clever ways they kill enemies.

"It’s not about the head shots, it’s about going into a situation to kill creatively with the only limitation being your sadistic imagination," said game producer Tanya Jessen.

About 45,600 people from 90 countries attended E3, which featured approximately 300 exhibitors, according to organizers at the Entertainment Software Association trade group behind the event.

Film director Steven Spielberg and actors Leonard Nimoy and Zoe Saldana were among the celebrities that stopped in.

The energy boded well for the videogame industry, which suffered from lagging sales during the economic meltdown.

"We are all optimistic about a return to form for the industry," Steinberg said. "There was not the gloom and doom as last year."

"I don’t think there is anything to worry about at all," Satterfield said. "You have the Move, Kinect, 3-D, and great software coming out. The industry is going to be fine."

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Apple Launches New Mac Mini

Apple said it launched a new version of its lowest-priced computer, Mac mini, with twice the graphics performance and lower power usage, from $699.

Apple said the product’s power consumption would be less than 10 watts when idle. The new Mac mini, which is 7.7 inches square by 1.4 inches, has an HDMI port and a new SD card slot to allow transfer of files from a digital camera.

It has a Nvidia GeForce 320M graphics processor, a 2.4 gigahertz Intel Core 2 Duo processor, 320 gigabyte (GB) hard-disk and 2GB RAM. It comes with Mac's Snow Leopard operating system.

Microsoft Releases Office 2010

Microsoft on Tuesday took the beta tags off its latest office suite and formally unveiled Office 2010, Visio 2010, and Project 2010.

The product is now available at 35,000 retail stores like Best Buy or online at Amazon.com, and can also be purchased pre-loaded on a variety of PCs.

"Working with major retail partners and PC makers, we've made dramatic changes in the way we deliver Office 2010 to give consumers more buying choice, making it easier than ever to unlock the power of Office on new and existing PCs," Stephen Elop, president of Microsoft's Business Division, said in a statement. "For the first time, people can purchase a Product Key Card at retail to activate Office 2010 preloaded on new PCs. For those who want to download Office 2010 direct from Office.com for an existing PC, the new Click-to-Run technology will have them up and running in a matter of minutes."

Added features include new video and editing options in PowerPoint, updated text effects and table formatting in Word, advanced e-mail management and calendaring options in Outlook, co-authoring options in Word, PowerPoint, and OneNote, and a Web-based option via Office Web Apps.

Microsoft released Office Web Apps on SkyDrive for users in the U.S., U.K., Ireland, and Canada last week. It is available on office.live.com, where users can view, edit, and share Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and OneNote documents from the browser. For more, read PCMag's full review of Microsoft Office Web Apps.

Office 2010 is being released in 10 languages, which will eventually expand to 94.

How much will it set you back? Office Home and Student 2010 - which includes Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and OneNote - will cost $149.99. Office Home and Business, which also includes Outlook, will retail for $279.99. Office Professional 2010, meanwhile, which also incorporates Publisher and Access, will cost $499.99.

You can opt to download the program directly to your PC, download and purchase a backup disc for $14.95, or purchase the physical software.

Microsoft released a beta version of Office 2010 in late 2009, and that program has since been downloaded more than 9 million times, the company said Tuesday. That's more than six times the size of the 2007 Microsoft Office beta release.

"Following the great response to the Office 2010 beta and the success of Windows 7, we predict this will be the biggest consumer release of Office, ever," Elop said.

AOL Sells Bebo

AOL has sold social-networking site Bebo to California-based Criterion Partners, The Wall Street Journal reports. The deal is worth a fraction of the $850 million AOL paid for Bebo in 2008, the paper said.

Reports that AOL was looking to drop Bebo surfaced in April, when the company reportedly sent around a memo to employees that said it might sell or shut down Bebo, because it would be too costly to make it profitable.

AOL bought Bebo in March 2008 to better position itself in the social networking space, but soon discovered "that social networking is a space with heavy competition," Jon Brod, executive vice president for AOL ventures, wrote in April.

"Bebo, unfortunately, is a business that has been declining and, as a result, would require significant investment in order to compete in the competitive social networking space," he said.

Microsoft’s Ozzie Mum on Tablet Plans

Microsoft Chief Software Architect Ray Ozzie was happy to talk about the history of computing Wednesday at a Silicon Valley event but did not want to talk about its future, as least as far as what Microsoft’s plans might be pertaining to tablet computing.

Appearing at the PLATO@5 conference held to honor the PLATO (Programming Logic for Automated Teaching Operations) platform, Ozzie refused to respond to comments Apple CEO Steve Jobs reportedly made this week about devices such as Apple’s iPad reducing the need for PCs. Ozzie declined to say what PC software king Microsoft’s strategy would be in relation to tablets.

"I would respond to that by saying this is great event, this is a tremendous event. I’m really glad to be here tonight. It’s really about PLATO and it’s about [PLATO founder Donald Bitzer, who was in attendance]," said Ozzie, who worked on PLATO and derived Lotus Notes from it.

The event, Ozzie stressed, was "not about Microsoft" and its plans.

Ozzie did cite how PLATO has benefitted Microsoft in his brief interview with InfoWorld, conducted after his public discussion about PLATO. "I can speak most directly to the fact that I believe the communication tools that were built on PLATO spread out into tools for computer-supported cooperative work, and systems such as [Microsoft] SharePoint are direct beneficiaries of that," he said.

PLATO is a computer-based teaching system that originated at the University of Illinois. It is credited with generating innovations such as plasma displays and social computing. Games were played on the system as well. The PLATO conference, at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, Calif., is being held in recognition of the system’s 50th anniversary.

Ozzie stressed the excitement PLATO generated from people who worked on

it. "Many of us tried to recreate some of that excitement," Ozzie said. "Notes was something many people tried to recreate," based on what had been done with PLATO, he said.

Asked why PLATO is perhaps not as well-known as it might otherwise be, Bitzer cited the low-key approach to the project. "First of all, we did no advertising ourselves," he said.

Bitzer also lauded Apple’s iPhone, calling it "amazing." "I have probably as much appreciation for that as anybody," Bitzer said.

Starbucks To Provide Free Wi-Fi in July

Coffee titan Starbucks said Monday that it would provide free one-click Wi-Fi at all of its company-operated stores beginning July 1.

Starbucks also announced a digital portal, known as the Digital Network, which will apparently serve as the launch screen for the new service when a user signs on. Launch partners will include among others, iTunes, /The New York Times/, Patch, /USA TODAY/, /The Wall Street Journal/, Yahoo and Zagat. Yahoo was named as the partner for the Digital Network, Starbucks said.

Previously, Starbucks charged $2.95 to connect for two hours via AT&T, the same price that McDonalds charged for Wi-Fi at its fast-food outlets. But McDonalds did away with charging for Wi-Fi in December, and Starbucks apparently felt compelled to follow suit.

Howard Schultz, the chief executive of Starbucks, made the announcement at a conference hosted by Wired Magazine on Monday, Starbucks said.

Time To Wake Up to Cyber Threat

NATO governments and the public must wake up to the threat of cyberattacks, which could paralyse a nation far more easily than conventional warfare, experts warned Friday.

"Cybercrime and cyberespionage are topics that can’t be ignored," said Melissa Hathaway, a former US cyber tsar, at a conference in Estonia organised by the trans-Atlantic alliance’s IT defence unit.

"Key infrastructure, including power stations, have become vulnerable due to their dependence on Internet connections," Hathaway said.

"There is no national security in the modern world without economic security, and both companies and private citizens should also realise the depth of the problem," she added.

Charlie Miller - a security expert who launches test assaults on IT systems - underlined that cyberwar is far easier than a conventional attack.

"It would take two years and cost less than 50 million dollars a year to prepare a cyberattack that could paralyse the United States," Miller

warned.

Such an attack could involve fewer than 600 hackers, he added.

Estonia is home to a unit known in NATO jargon as the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence.

Bitter experience taught Estonia - one of the world’s most wired nations and a NATO member since 2004 - all about cyberattacks.

The Baltic state of 1.3 million people suffered an assault in 2007 that paralysed key business and government web services for days.

It came as Estonian authorities shifted a Soviet-era war memorial from central Tallinn to a cemetery site.

The monument, erected when Moscow took over after World War II, became a flashpoint following independence in 1991 for rallies by Estonia’s ethnic-Russian minority.

Estonia blamed Moscow for stoking riots in Tallinn as the memorial was moved, and said the cyberattacks were traced to Russian official servers.

Russia, however, denied involvement.

Despite Estonia’s experience, people elsewhere have not woken up, said British defence ministry expert Gloria Craig.

"It’s still hard to convince the public that a cyberattack is an attack, when people don’t see a smoking gun," Craig said.

"As of now NATO is not prepared for a global cyberattack," she added.

US specialist Bruce Schneier, however, said the current threat should not be overplayed.

"Building tanks does not mean you fear you could be overrun by a military force right now. It pays to build tanks and it pays to prepare for cyberwar, but I don’t believe that’s a fear we should worry about right now," Schneier said.

"It’s very easy to invent scare scenarios but this does not mean we should actually be scared by them," he said.

Schneier said, however, that it time to prepare now so that sci-fi style scenarios never become reality.

Facebook Refuses Changes Urged by Privacy Groups

Following a flurry of protests in the last few months about its privacy policies, Facebook had hoped its efforts to give users better control of personal information had tamped down the problem. But a group of privacy organizations has now sent an open letter to the popular social network, saying more changes are needed - and Facebook is saying no.

The group’s letter, sent to CEO Mark Zuckerberg on Wednesday, said it was "glad to see that Facebook has taken steps in the past weeks to

address some of its outstanding privacy problems." It asked for additional steps, including empowering users to decide exactly which apps can access their information, making "instant personalization" opt-in by default, giving users control over "every piece of information they share" on Facebook, and using the secure HTTPS protocol for "all interactions by default."

Instant personalization gives Facebook’s partner web sites access to user information as soon as a logged-in user visits the partner site, before any consent is given. The coalition wants this function turned off by default.

The organizations signing the letter are the ACLU of Northern California, the Center for Democracy and Technology, the Center for Digital Democracy, Consumer Action, Consumer Watchdog, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Electronic Privacy Information Center, Privacy Activism, Privacy Lives, and the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse.

Other actions the group urged on Facebook include providing users with simple tools for exporting their content and personal details on Facebook so that, if they want to leave the site for another social-networking site, they do not have to choose between accepting Facebook’s privacy standards and retaining connections with friends.

In response, Facebook said it’s interested in "constructive dialog" with consumer groups, but it largely rejected the requests. It pointed to simplified privacy controls that it recently implemented, and noted that the only information that can’t be protected is the "same information that anyone could access simply by going to a Facebook user’s profile," such as name, gender and social networks.

In addition, the social-networking giant said it would not allow moving personal data off the site because it "doesn’t respect" the information that other users have shared with a given person, which would be included in the export.

Brad Shimmin, an analyst with industry research firm Current Analysis, said this collection of organizations "is not one to be sneezed at." Several of the organizations have jointly filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission and sent a letter to Congress.

Shimmin said Facebook still has to face up to making users feel that the security of their personal information is a high priority.

He noted that the decision to not use HTTPS on every communication could be a technical one, since it can slow performance on high-traffic sites. It should be used for passwords and similar data, he said, adding that it seems "kind of ridiculous" to use it for status updates.

Shimmin agreed that opt-out should be the default for all user data because of the principle that "your data is yours, and you have the right to open it up or pull it back."

NBA Finals ’Tweets’ Top World Cup

The World Cup has fueled record numbers of messages on Twitter but the all-time high was set on Thursday after the Los Angeles Lakers won the NBA

title, the micro-blogging service said Friday.

Twitter spokesman Sean Garrett said in a blog post that Twitter saw a record 3,085 "tweets" per second, or TPS, after the Lakers beat the Boston Celtics to win their 16th NBA title.

Garrett said the previous record was set after Japan scored against Cameroon in their World Cup match on Monday, when 2,940 tweets-per-second were sent in the 30 seconds after the goal was scored.

Brazil's first score against North Korea in their 2-1 that same day saw 2,928 TPS. Mexico's goal to tie South Africa in the opening game of the tournament last week was next with 2,704 TPS.

Garrett said Twitter usually sees about 750 TPS on an average day and 65 million total Tweets a day.

Earlier this week, Twitter warned users to expect outages as it copes with the heavy traffic during the World Cup.

The micro-blogging service has exploded in popularity since it was launched in March 2006 and Twitter chief operating officer Dick Costello said recently that it now attracts 190 million visitors a month.

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